

individuals and the group is an essential part of my work. We are not there as judge or jury but to create a training environment that encourages self-awareness, provides a safe space for reflection and to model what dignity and respect at work might look like.

Training someone I have come to know as the person who bullied my client is not a comfortable experience. Supervision is essential. But it also helps me to see this issue from another perspective, to see the impact of how organisational processes/grievance procedures so often fail to deal sufficiently well with either the victims of bullying or the accused, and to recognise the ambiguities and complexities that remain despite all the policy making.

Supervision in my training partnerships is as important to the health of our work as it is in my client work – not as frequent, but often enough to process the spoken and the unspoken and to address the shadow side. I continue to be excited by the ideas we share, collaborating and researching to develop future work, pooling together our networks and resources. Next year, we launch a new workshop within the organisation on teaching self-help skills for health and happiness, drawing on positive psychology approaches to support behaviour change.

Starting all over again, with a new workshop, I clock the 'I know nothing' feeling going on in me. I now know that this as an inevitable part of the process, of planning something from scratch, of starting again, of developing a new programme of materials and researching new terrain. I notice it and no longer fear it. My green-fingered co-trainer equates this with the feeling he has at the start of each new year in his garden, when everything is chopped back and he is waiting for the signs of spring, he feels that he knows nothing about gardening... that is until the cycle begins all over again. It's no wonder that gardening analogies are so often used in the field of counselling and personal/professional development as they speak of new growth, of time to rest, of fallow periods, and of the beginnings, middles and ends that are an intrinsic part of the life cycle.

As 31 January approaches, I don't need to dread the ever-present Adam Hart Davis adverts popping up reminding the self-employed to complete their tax returns. My first year's accounts have been handed over and I can report that I am keeping my financial head above water. I am clearer about how I want to continue to develop my practice and my training work, about what supports me in my endeavours and what doesn't. And were I asked to put last year's learning into a nutshell, (and thankfully I wasn't) I realise I have a greater appreciation of the responsibility we carry as practitioners and the self-insight and self-respect we need in order to fulfil it. I have always known this, but as my counsellor helpfully reminded me, 'There's knowing – and then there's really knowing'. ■

The Vocational

Mapping out a path for workplace rehabilitation, by **Tim**

The Vocational Rehabilitation Association (VRA) is a national charity covering all regions of the UK, whose mission is to:

- help our members in the public, private and voluntary sectors working in the field of disability and employment to develop their professional practice and to maintain their awareness of a broad range of disability issues
- raise awareness of the issues of disability and employment with other beneficiaries, such as disabled people, carers, employers, the insurance industry, law firms, trade unions and health professionals.

The VRA's current status

First established in May 1994 as the Vocational Rehabilitation Association Limited, the organisation changed its name to the National Vocational Rehabilitation Association (NVRA) in the late 1990s before being re-launched, with a new constitution, as the Vocational Rehabilitation Association (VRA) at its annual general meeting on 17 March 2005. It currently has a membership of 220 reflecting a wide mix of vocational rehabilitation practitioners including:

- rehabilitation counsellors
- rehabilitation case managers
- vocational/employment consultants
- rehabilitation treatment/training providers
- disability employment advisers
- employment support workers
- occupational therapists.

The new constitution paved the way for adjustments to the role and function of the Association arising from major changes taking place in the UK in vocational rehabilitation and in incapacity benefit reform by the government.

The purpose of the VRA was also re-defined as being to:

- support and protect people with disability through a strong professional provider base
- ensure professionals working in vocational rehabilitation are responsible and accountable for their delivery
- develop national standards of practice for professionals working in the field of disability and employment
- liaise with relevant organisations to establish education and training processes for new and existing practitioners
- establish certification and accreditation processes in the field
- hold meetings and seminars on issues of relevance to all those involved in vocational rehabilitation
- publish and distribute a professional journal, currently *Rehab Network*
- influence government policy relative to disability and

Rehabilitation Association

Dawson

employment

- seek and obtain international recognition
- promote study and research into evidence based vocational rehabilitation.

In September 2005, the Association was delighted to announce that Professor Mansel Aylward CB had agreed to be its patron.

Professor Aylward was until April 2005, Chief Medical Adviser, Medical Director and Chief Scientist to the Department of Work and Pensions and Chief Medical Adviser and Head of Profession at the Veterans' Agency, Ministry of Defence. He is now Honorary Professor jointly in the School of Psychology, Cardiff University and the Medical School, University of Wales College of Medicine and also at Harvard University. Professor Aylward also holds the Chair of Psychology and Disability Research at Cardiff University.

Our medium-term goal of launching professional standards of practice came to fruition in June 2007 with the official launch of the VRA's *Standards of practice*, developed to promote best practice among the increasing number of people who work in this field. Government-sponsored research by the VRA in 2002 showed that further standards and qualification development work was needed if a suitable range of accredited qualifications were to be made available for the field. These findings provided the incentive for us to start work on the standards.

The launch was made in conjunction at the Overcoming the Barriers conference in June 2007 of the DWP vocational rehabilitation task group (government, TUC, CBI and ABI). The conference was chaired by Dr Bill Gunnyeon with keynote address from Lord McKenzie of Luton, Lords Minister, DWP. Dame Carol Black also spoke on 'Rehabilitation, health and work – expectations, challenges and the way forward'.

At the time of the launch, as chair of the VRA, I explained, 'We strongly believe there is need for well-trained vocational rehabilitation practitioners. The government has stated that perhaps a million incapacity benefit claimants would like to work if they were given the right help and support, and that nine out of 10 people coming onto IB expect to get back to work in due course. Professional rehabilitation assistance to help them back into employment is at present only

available to a minority. Many more people could therefore benefit, as there is evidence that working can help the recovery process and people's mental health.'

The standards cover such crucial areas as service delivery, client protection, professional development and maintenance, professional knowledge, transferable skills, governance and business development.

VRA vice-chair Gail Kovacs, who has led the VRA's Standards Task Group instrumental in developing the standards, added: 'It is important to stress that the standards provide a baseline measure of service delivery and expectations, advice and guidance for the professional during daily task completion, as well as helping to monitor performance.'

The VRA's future aim is for the Standards to form the foundation of an accreditation process for VR professionals. Over the next two years, the VRA will be developing a formal process for demonstrating compliance and for addressing those who do not comply. Once this is in place, we foresee the professional being able to publicly state that they work in accordance with occupational practice.

Running alongside the development of the Standards is the need to ensure that appropriate training and educational programmes are in place to meet the professional development needs of practitioners.

Through its Professional Development Committee, formed in July 2007 and led by Dr Andrew Frank, consisting of practitioners and academics, a strategy is emerging that enables members to choose the training they need to enhance their professional practice.

The VRA aims to be a key player in supporting those whose role it is to ensure that VR is successful in enabling individuals to maximise their abilities to participate in and be rewarded for their contribution to the UK economy.

The increasing emphasis on the development of return to work policies for people disadvantaged by disability or ill health means that vocational rehabilitation will have a leading role within the UK labour market for the foreseeable future.

Membership of the VRA is open to individuals and corporate bodies with an interest in health and work. For more information please visit our website at www.vocationalrehabilitationassociation.org.uk ■

Tim Dawson is the chair of the Vocational Rehabilitation Association. He is currently working with the Nottinghamshire Unemployed Workers Centre. Prior to this he was the economic development and learning policy manager for the Leicestershire Training and Enterprise Council and the Leicestershire Learning and Skills Council.